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Highways of the Fur Trade

by

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Highways of the Fur Trade.

By LAWRENCE J. BURPEE, F.R.S.C., F.R.G.S.

(Read May 27, 1914).

A glance at the map of the northern half of North America readily suggests why the routes of the fur trade were almost invariably water thoroughfares. Nowhere else in the world will one find such a remarkable system of waterways as that of North America, and particularly of the upper half of the continent. It is not merely theoretically possible to travel in a canoe across the continent, east and west, north and south, with an occasional portage, but the fact has been demonstrated over and over again by explorers and fur-traders. From Lake Winnipeg, in the heart of the continent, one may paddle east up Winnipeg river to the Lake of the Woods, thence by Rainy river, Rainy lake, and a series of smaller waterways over the almost imperceptible height of land and down to Lake Superior, coast along the shore of that inland sea, descend the St. Mary's river to Lake Huron, and from there either follow the Great Lakes down to the St. Lawrence, or take the old route by way of Georgian bay, French river, Lake Nipissing and the Ottawa to Montreal. From Lake Winnipeg, again, one may take either the Hayes route or the Nelson to Hudson bay. From the same central lake, one may ascend the Saskatchewan to the Rocky mountains and descend the Columbia to the Pacific; or, leaving the Saskatchewan at Cumberland lake, paddle through a series of small waterways to the Churchill, ascend that river to Lake La Loche, descend the Clearwater to the Athabaska, the latter to Lake Athabaska, ascend Peace river to one of its sources at the headwaters of the Parsnip, portage to the Fraser, and descend that wild stream to the ocean. Again, following the last route to Athabaska, one may descend Slave river to Great Slave lake, and follow the mighty Mackenzie to the Arctic. Finally, returning once more to Lake Winnipeg, one may ascend the Red river to its upper waters, portage to the Mississippi and descend the Father of Waters to the Gulf of Mexico. And these are but a few of many possible routes from Lake Winnipeg to the shores of the three oceans. The fur-traders did not need any gift of shrewdness to lead them to the adoption of water routes. Water routes were practically thrust upon them. Wherever they went they found some river flowing to or from the place they sought, and that river was generally the easiest and often the only road to follow.

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THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF CANADA

In sketching very briefly the development of these thoroughfares of the fur trade, one finds two more or less definite and distinct starting-points. In the north, the men of the Hudson's Bay Company pushed their way inland from Hudson bay to Lake Winnipeg. From the St. Lawrence, the fur-traders of New France, and their legitimate successors of the North West Company, ascended the Great Lakes to the Kaministiquia or the Grand Portage, and from there they, too, made their way to Lake Winnipeg. From Lake Winnipeg, for a time independently, and later as factors and traders in the one surviving company, they worked their way west and north over far-flung thoroughfares, to the remote shores of the Pacific and the Arctic.

Of the earlier attempts of the pathfinders of the Hudson's Bay Company to penetrate the vast wilderness that lay to the west of Hudson bay, one, that of Samuel Hearne, had its starting point at Prince of Wales Fort, at the mouth of the Churchill river; another that of Henry Kellsey, at Fort Nelson, at the mouth of Nelson river. Hearne's expedition, important though it was from a geographical point of view, need not be considered here as it opened up no route in to the interior. Kellsey's much earlier expedition, up the Nelson river and beyond, was equally unfruitful. There is evidence that both the Churchill and the Nelson were used to some slight extent by the fur-traders, and to a much greater extent by Indians bringing down their furs to the forts on the bay, but neither was ever developed into a trade route to the interior. The recognized road to the west was by way of the Hayes river, and the gateway was York Factory near the mouth of that river.

From York Factory set out two of the explorers of the Hudson's Bay Company who were instrumental in blazing a trail from the bay to the heart of the great plains—Anthony Hendry in 1754 and Matthew Cocking in 1772.¹ As far as Knee lake they followed what was afterward known as the Hayes route, but from Knee lake they turned over to the Nelson, through a country that remained unsurveyed almost to the present day. The rivers and lakes they traversed between Knee lake and Cross lake on the Nelson are not shown on any of the government maps. The first authentic account of the Hayes route proper, from York Factory to Playgreen lake and Lake Winnipeg, is contained in the journals of David Thompson, for some years an officer of the Hudson's Bay Company, and afterward astronomer of the North West Company. In 1787 Thompson went inland from York Factory to the Saskatchewan, by way of the Hayes Route and Lake Winnipeg. His description of the route will be

¹ For their journals, see Trans. Royal Society of Canada, 1907, and 1908.

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found in McLeod's *Peace River*, p. 47.¹ A more interesting account is that of Captain (afterwards Sir John) Franklin, in his *Journey to the Polar Sea*, ch. 2.² The route was by no means an easy one, involving a number of portages, but it was preferable to the Nelson whose tempestuous current and rapids made navigation both difficult and dangerous. For a century and a half the Hayes has been the recognized thoroughfare from Hudson Bay to Lake Winnipeg.

Let us turn back now to the St. Lawrence and trace briefly the opening up of the southerly fur trade route from Montreal to Lake Winnipeg. During the French régime two water routes were recognized, and used to a greater or less extent, from Montreal to Lake Huron. One followed the Great Lakes by way of Niagara and Detroit; the other the Ottawa river, Lake Nipissing and French river to Georgian bay. Both led to the trading posts of Michilimackinac and Sault Ste. Marie, and thence around the wild shores of Lake Superior to the Kaministiquia and Grand Portage. So the present-day quarrel between Montreal and Toronto as to the respective merits or demerits of the Georgian Bay route and the Welland Canal route may perhaps be traced back to the seventeenth century. Broadly speaking, the Niagara route led to Detroit, to the Ohio, the Illinois country, and the Mississippi; while the Ottawa route was the great highway to the far west, although for a considerable period this was also the recognized route to the Illinois and the Mississippi. The use of the Ottawa route from Montreal to Georgian bay and Lake Huron dates from the expeditions of Le Caron and Champlain in 1615, from those of Etienne Brûlé in 1622, of Nicolet in 1634 and of Jogues in 1641. Around the shores of Lake Superior, the way was led by Ménard in 1661, Radisson about the same time, Allouez in 1665, and Dulhut in 1678. As to the Niagara route, its use may perhaps be traced back to Brûlé's discovery of Lake Ontario in 1615, and Brébeuf and Chaumonot's discovery of Lake Erie in 1640, or possibly Dallion's visit to the Neutral Nation in 1626. At any rate, by 1679 not merely canoes but La Salle's little ship the *Griffon* is navigating the waters of Lake Erie and Lake Huron; and in 1701 Cadillac is founding a trading post at Detroit.³

¹ *Peace River*. A Canoe Voyage from Hudson's Bay to Pacific, by the late Sir George Simpson, in 1828. Edited with notes by Malcolm McLeod. Ottawa, 1872.

² Narrative of a Journey to the shores of the Polar Sea, in the years 1819-20-21-22. By John Franklin. London, 1823.

³ See Lahontan's *New Voyages to North America* for an account of the route from Montreal to Niagara, and Sabrevois' *Mémoire* of 1718 (Wis. Hist. Coll., xvi, 363), for an admirably detailed description of the route from Niagara to Detroit and the Illinois country. For the Ottawa route, in the early days, one cannot do better than refer to Benjamin Sulte's paper on "The Valley of the Grand River" (R.S.C. Trans., 1898).

One of the notable advantages of the Niagara route was its freedom from portages. With the exception of those around the St. Lawrence River rapids, and the somewhat formidable portage to surmount Niagara Falls, the way was clear from Montreal to Sault Ste. Marie; while the Ottawa route involved a succession of more or less troublesome portages between Montreal and Georgian bay. Champlain says: "In the Algonquin (Ottawa) river from Sault St. Louis to near the lake of the Bissierouis (Nipissing) there are more than 80 rapids great and small."¹ On the other hand, the latter route possessed two distinct advantages: it was shorter, and more sheltered.

This brings us to the western end of Lake Superior, between which and the Lake of the Woods four canoe routes were known and used to a greater or less extent. The first of these to be discovered was that by the way of the Kaministiquia river. In the year 1688 Jacques de Noyon, bent on discovery, made his way up that river to Dog lake and by Dog river to a small lake at the height of land, now known as Height of Land lake. From here he descended to Lac des Mille Lacs, and by the Seine river to Rainy lake, or the Lake of the Christinaux as it was then called. He wintered at the western end of this river. In the spring he descended the Ouchichig, or Rainy river, to the Lake of the Woods, or Lac aux Isles as it is called in the narrative.² In 1717 Zacharie Robutel de la Noüe seems to have followed the same route to Rainy lake, but proceeded no farther to the westward.³

In the year 1730, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Vérendrye, was stationed at Kaministiquia. The following year he began his long series of western explorations with a view to the discovery of a practicable route to the Western sea. His route from Lake Superior to Rainy lake, where the first of his trading posts was built, was by the way of Grand Portage.⁴ La Vérendrye did not himself reach Rainy lake until the spring of 1732, the pioneer trip over the new route being made in the autumn of 1731 by his nephew, La Jemeraie. This journey would appear to mark the discovery of the afterward famous Grand Portage route. An earlier mention of the route is, however, found in a letter of 1722 by an officer named Pachot who, in urging the establishment of a post on Rainy lake says, "The best route to go to the proposed establishment would be by a small river named the Nantokouagane, which is about 7 leagues from

¹ Laverdière ed. p. 1391.

² Margry, *Découvertes et établissements des Français*, vi, 495 *et seq.*

³ Margry, vi, 504 *et seq.*

⁴ Journals of La Vérendrye (Dominion Archives MSS).

Kaministigoya."¹ This evidently refers to Pigeon river, and the Grand Portage route.

La Vérendrye in describing this route says that forty-seven portages have to be made in going from Lake Superior to Rainy lake, and he mentions another route farther north which involved only nine portages, and was believed to be more practicable. This northerly route proved on investigation to be unsatisfactory, as it added many leagues to the journey, and was so shallow that eight-seat canoes could not be taken through without great difficulty. He therefore returned to the Grand Portage route, employing his men in improving the navigation, reducing the portages to thirty-two, and clearing the portage paths so that seven could be made in a day. It is not certain if the more northerly route mentioned by La Vérendrye was that by the way of the Kaministikwia, or one of several variants of the Grand Portage route. As has been noted elsewhere, La Vérendrye makes no mention in any of his letters or memoirs of the explorations of De Noyon or La Nolle, and there is no reason to suppose that he had ever heard of them. "Indeed, in studying this period of western discovery, one is struck by the fact that each of the French explorers worked independently without availing himself of the results of previous explorations, if indeed they had ever come to his knowledge."²

A third route from Lake Superior to Rainy lake and the Lake of the Woods was by way of the St. Louis river, at the extreme western end of the lake, where the city of Duluth now stands. This route was unknown, so far as we have any evidence, during the period of French rule, though portions of it may have been traversed by Dulhut³ in the course of his explorations in the Sioux country 1678-1681, and possibly by Radisson and Chouart⁴ in 1661. A century or more later (1767 to be exact) Jonathan Carver also used some of these waterways on his way from the Mississippi to Lake Superior.⁵ In 1798 David Thompson, astronomer of the North West Company, made a rapid reconnaissance survey from the Assiniboine to the

¹ Margry, vi, 513 *et seq.*

² Burpee, "Canoe Routes from Lake Superior to the Westward," *Geographical Journal*, Aug., 1910, p. 200. Further details of the development of the Kaministikwia and Grand Portage routes will be found in the article quoted above. The first detailed description of the Grand Portage route is in Alexander Henry's "Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories, 1760-1776," 1809. New ed., 1901.

³ See his letters to Frontenac and de Seignelay, 1769 and 1685, in Dominion Archives, "Posts in the Western Country," Vol. 16. Also Minn. Hist. Coll. I, 314.

⁴ See Radisson's Voyages, Prince Society, 1885, and Sulte's article, R.S.C. Trans. 1904.

⁵ "Travels through the Interior Parts of North America," 1778.

sources of the Mississippi, thence to Lake Superior.¹ We know, however, from his own writings that the route from Lake Superior to the Lake of the Woods by way of the St. Louis river had been discovered by the traders of the North West Company some time before. In a letter dated 1840, on the boundaries between the United States and British North America,² he says:

"The inspection of the map will clearly show the superior communication by the River St. Louis (then, 1783, the great thoroughfare of the fur trade both to the interior, the Lake of the Woods, and to the rich countries of the Mississippi and its branches) to the Lake of the Woods, over all other communications; it is a continuous river to a height of land, thence by a carrying place of 6,278 yards to the Vermillion River, which descends into Lake Nameukan, and thence direct to the Lake of the Woods."

Another route, by way of the St. Louis river, over the height of land to the upper waters of the Mississippi, up that river to Leech lake and Red Cedar lake, and down the Big Fork to Rainy river, is described in George Henry Monk's "Some Account of the Department of Fond du Lac," 1807.³

According to David Thompson, the St. Louis river formed the principal route of the fur traders during the early years of British rule in Canada, and the Grand Portage route only came into general use as a result of disputes with the United States authorities as to boundaries, following the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. Similar difficulties some years later drove the traders still farther north. "In the summer of 1800," says Thompson,⁴ "a United States collector landed (at Grand Portage) and told the British fur traders the bay and carrying place were within the United States territory, and he would levy duties on all the merchandise and furs that should be landed in the bay, or pass on the carrying place The British fur traders were aware that against the arbitrary duties to be levied they would have no support from the Provincial government of Canada; they were therefore obliged to explore and open out a very broken and circuitous route to the interior by the Kah-min-is-tikquoi-aw river, about forty miles north-eastward of the great carrying place of the Pigeon river, at great labor and expense, and in 1802 removed thereto."

¹ See Coues' notes in his edition of the Henry-Thompson Journals, 1897, and Tyrrell, "Journeys of David Thompson," 1888.

² In Dominion Archives.

³ Masson Papers, in the Archives of McGill University.

⁴ *Op. cit.*

The accidental rediscovery of the old Kaministikwia route is described in the *Reminiscences* of Roderick McKenzie,¹ of the North West Company:

"After a long absence in the Indian territories," he says, "I paid this year (1797) a visit to Canada. Returning the following Spring, on my first trip from Grand Portage to *Lac La Pluie*, I met a family of Indians at the height of land from whom I accidentally learned the existence of a water communication a little way behind and parallel to this, extending from Lake Superior to Lake *La Pluie*, which is navigable for large canoes and, if adopted, would avoid the Grand Portage. This was excellent information; of course I immediately engaged one of the Indians to meet me at a certain point in *Lac La Croix*, to show me this new route, but on my arrival, as appointed, the Indian was not there. However, being acquainted with the entrance of the route, I proceeded without him and reached a post of the company where I procured a guide who accompanied me to Caministiquia on Lake Superior, from whence I soon reached Grand Portage, being the first who reached there from *Lac La Pluie* direct by water communication."

This, however, was not the first attempt to discover a practicable canoe route for the North West Company north of Grand Portage. As mentioned by Roderick McKenzie in his *Reminiscences*, the company had as long before as 1784 sent an expedition to examine a water communication reported to exist between Lake Nipigon and the Winnipeg river. This expedition was in charge of Edouard Umfreville.² Umfreville made his way through to the mouth of English river, and reported the route practicable, but it was roundabout and inconvenient, and the fur-traders continued to use the Grand Portage until the end of the century, when they finally adopted the Kaministikwia route, and rebuilt near the mouth of the river their famous post Fort William.

From the Lake of the Woods to Lake Winnipeg, La Vérendrye had long since led the way down Winnipeg river. His *Journals* record the fact that he discovered another route between the two lakes, by way of Roseau river and the Red river, but this was not practicable except for light canoes, and Winnipeg river continued to be the highway of the fur trade not only in his day but for a hundred years or more thereafter.

¹ Masson, *Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-ouest*, I, 46.

² Umfreville's narrative is among the Masson Papers in the McGill University Archives. An account of the journey will be found in "Canoe Routes from Lake Superior to the Westward, *op. cit.* See also "Memorial of the North West Company," 1784, and letter of James McGill to Henry Hamilton, 1785, in Report on Canadian Archives, 1890, pp. 48 and 56.

From Lake Winnipeg, La Vérendrye and his sons, and their successors during the French régime, explored the Red and Assiniboine rivers on the one hand, and that mighty river of the plains, the Saskatchewan, on the other, though none of the three were actually traced to their headwaters until years after the close of the period of French rule in Canada. The sons of La Vérendrye were also instrumental in opening to white traders a route that apparently had long been used by the Indians, from the Saskatchewan to the Assiniboine by way of Lakes Winnipegosis and Manitoba. Portage la Prairie, near the site of La Vérendrye's trading post of Fort La Reine, marks the Assiniboine end of the route.

The headwaters of the North and South Saskatchewan led by Rocky Mountain passes to the upper waters of the Columbia and the Kootenay, and so to the Pacific; but long before the course of western exploration had been pushed so far, adventurous fur-traders had found a way to the vast system of waterways of the extreme north-west. First of these was an enterprising New Englander named Peter Pond who, in 1778, made his way from the Saskatchewan to the Churchill by way of Cumberland Lake and Frog Portage. Thus far he had been preceded by Thomas and Joseph Frobisher and Alexander Henry, and also up the Churchill to Ile à la Crosse lake, but beyond that point Pond was the original explorer. Crossing what was afterward known as Methye Portage, he looked down into the beautiful valley of the Clearwater—a scene made memorable by the travels of many famous explorers of later years, Alexander Mackenzie, Franklin, Back, Richardson and others. Descending the steep slope he found himself on the banks of a river whose waters ultimately find their way to the Arctic ocean. He followed the Clearwater to the Athabaska, and the latter to the lake of the same name. A year or two later he descended Slave river to Great Slave lake, which Samuel Hearne had discovered from the north in 1771, and also appears to have reached the waters of Peace river.¹

Eleven years after Pond's discovery of Lake Athabaska, Alexander Mackenzie left Fort Chipewyan, the North West Company's trading post on that lake, for his memorable journey to the mouth of the river that bears his name. He descended Slave river to Great Slave lake, found the outlet of the Mackenzie, and after many adventures finally traced it to the Arctic ocean. Three years later this tireless explorer set forth again from Chipewyan, ascended the Peace through the Rocky Mountains, and after surmounting almost incredible difficulties found himself at last on the shores of the Pacific—

¹ A detailed account of Pond's explorations will be found in "The Search for the Western Sea," chap. vii.

having solved at last the problem that for a couple of centuries had baffled French explorers, an overland route to the Western sea.¹

The fur-traders of the rival companies, the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, now had available water routes from Hudson bay on the one side and Montreal on the other, to Lake Winnipeg, and by way of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan to the heart of the great plains; by Frog and Methye portages to Lake Athabaska, the Peace River country, Great Slave lake, and the valley of the Mackenzie; and by the Peace River pass over the mountains to that new empire of the far west soon to be known as New Caledonia.

Following Mackenzie's expedition through the Peace River pass in 1793, and stimulated by his example, other adventurous spirits of the North West Company discovered and named various passes through the Rocky mountains south of the Peace. In 1800 Duncan McGillivray ascended the North Saskatchewan to a pass which he named after Jasper Howse, of the same company. In 1811 David Thompson ascended the Athabaska, and its tributary the Whirlpool, to the height of land, and discovered Athabaska pass—for many years afterward the principal thoroughfare east and west through the mountains. Yellowhead, or Tête Jaune, pass, seems to have been discovered about the same time. The Simpson and Kicking Horse passes were discovered many years later, the first by Sir George Simpson, and the latter by Dr. James Hector of the Palliser expedition.

It is a fact not without interest in the present rapid survey of water thoroughfares, that these and other passes through the Rocky mountains form the gateways leading to and from the river systems on either side the continental divide. As the writer has had occasion to say elsewhere:

"To reach any of the rivers that drain the Pacific slope it is necessary to cross one or other of the Rocky Mountain passes. Here the rivers of the plains were still the friends of explorers, as they had been in the easy access they afforded from one to another. Their guiding fingers pointed the way, and their waters offered a certain, if not always easy, pathway to the eastern entrance of every pass through the mountains. The Peace river leads not only up to, but through the Peace River pass; Pine river, a branch of the Peace, offers a passage-way through the pass of the same name, and connects with the Missinichinka, a small tributary of the Parsnip; the Miette, a mountain affluent of the Athabaska, rises near the summit of Yellowhead pass, close to the headwaters of the Fraser; Whirlpool river, another

¹ Voyages from Montreal through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans, in 1789 and 1793.

branch of the Athabaska, similarly rises in the Athabaska pass, and down the western slope a small stream leads to the Columbia; a tributary of the North Saskatchewan rises in Howse pass, almost within a stone's throw of the source of the Blaeberry branch of the Columbia; similarly the Kicking Horse pass, Simpson pass, White Man's pass, Kananaskis pass, the North Fork, the Crows Nest, and the North and South Kootenay passes, are all approached by one or other of the numerous tributaries of the South Saskatchewan, and in every case on the other side of the summit a branch of either the Columbia or the Kootenay is ready to convey the traveller, or at least to lead him, to the main streams in the valleys below."¹

Alexander Mackenzie discovered the upper waters of the Fraser river, in his expedition of 1793, but thought it was the Columbia. Simon Fraser, in one of the most daring journeys in the history of exploration, followed the same turbulent river to the sea in 1807, and only realized when he reached its mouth that it was not the Columbia. David Thompson, in 1807-1811, explored every foot of the real Columbia, and its great tributary the Kootenay, from source to mouth. By the year 1811, therefore, these pioneers of the fur trade had opened new thoroughfares from the passes of the Rocky mountains to the sea, and in the decades that followed brigades of canoes, with their valuable cargoes of skins, set forth periodically from Fort Simpson, near the mouth of the Columbia, to cross the continent to York Factory on Hudson bay, or Montreal on the far-off St. Lawrence.

Between the years 1834 and 1850, John McLeod, of the Hudson's Bay Company, and Robert Campbell and J. Bell of the same company, had opened new highways of the fur trade in the far north-west, by their explorations of the Liard, Dease and Stikine rivers, and the Pelly, Yukon and Porcupine. By the middle of the nineteenth century, therefore, no quarter of the northern half of the continent remained inaccessible to the adventurous fur-traders who still held undisputed sway over the greater portion of this immense territory; a sovereignty made possible by reason of the extraordinary network of waterways intersecting the land in every direction—the highways and byways of the fur trade.

¹ Search for the Western Sea, xlv-xlv.